It should be apparent that air power can play a significant and even decisive role in anti-partisan [irregular] warfare, providing its importance is recognised early and its employment is on a scale commensurate with the dangers to be faced.


There have been few periods in word history when wars have not been taking place somewhere around the globe. From the time of its advent as an instrument of military power, in the early years of the 20th century, air power has played an increasingly prominent role in the conduct of war, from large scale to limited military operations. With the maturing of conceptual thinking and the leapfrogging improvements through technology, air power has become an instrument of national policy in its own right, as well as an essential component of an integrated military force.

In the past few decades, small wars have started to be compartmentalised by using and defining terms such as ‘limited war’, ‘irregular war’, ‘counterinsurgency operations’, and more recently ‘hybrid war’. Each of these terms have their own peculiar connotations and nuances, but all of them could be clubbed under the term ‘small wars’. Small wars are generally localised in geographical dimension, and limited military operations are generally characterised by restrained political objectives. These types of conflict require control of the air for the employment of conventional military forces, a truism that is now being taken for granted by Western forces.

A small war environment is arguably the most complex that military forces can operate in and could encompass a wide range of missions within the same theatre. Air power could be simultaneously conducting humanitarian relief missions while providing control of the air as well as proactive and reactive air-to-surface precision strikes. Effectiveness in conducting such a wide ranging spectrum of missions is fundamentally dependent on the flexibility and versatility of the force as well as the correct balance of capabilities. Here again, the balance of capabilities to conduct the demanded spectrum of missions itself is a wide spectrum, at times beyond the resource availability of many nations.

By virtue of its technological complexity and the associated resource implications, air power has largely remained the prerogative of nations with adequate resources and national technology base. Limited military operations and/or small wars involving the national interests of major powers have often seen the employment of air power through proxy air forces in a localised, but extensive manner. The Spanish Civil War and later, the Korean War are early examples of such usage of air power. However, lessons drawn from these conflicts, where both sides employed air forces, must always be qualified by the strategic context of the war being analysed. Similarly, no enduring lesson regarding the use of air power can be safely drawn from the experiences in small wars either. The mercurial nature of the political objectives that define the characteristics, conduct and scope of any small war makes it necessary to analyse the application of air power within a strict context of the prevailing balance of military power. Therefore, there can be no universal lessons that can be gleaned from any one small war.

Compared to wars fought by proxy air forces in the past, the situation is very different in limited conflicts...
wherein only one of the belligerents use air power. In such one-sided conflicts, from an air power perspective, air superiority prevails for the side that possesses air power, almost from the outset. Even so, the pre-condition of ‘air superiority’ or at least adequate control of the air for any military success holds true even in such circumstances. However, it must be emphasised that this condition does not automatically lead to victory in all military combat operations in small wars or limited military campaigns. Restraints imposed by political objectives, terrain and the composition of the adversary force could all impose varying levels of limitations in achieving outright military victory.

By their very nature, small wars will be politically sensitive and intervention with troops-on-the-ground may not be an attractive option. In such circumstances air power, which does not need to leave a footprint in the operating theatre, would provide a viable and appealing option. Air power’s range and effectiveness provides it with the capacity to create the necessary effects in an increased geographical area. When this is combined with the very broad spectrum of weapon-effects that is inherent to air power, it becomes a potent capability. Today, air power has become a ‘must have’ capability for conventional military forces of a nation that is involved in small wars and limited military operations.

Air power can be tailored for selective or large scale employment, depending on strategic circumstances. Air power is usually the first and last element involved, particularly in the delivery of combat forces and material through ubiquitous air mobility. Air power also remains capable of tailoring itself to achieve limited political objectives that are common in small wars. It even has the ability to deliver effects on its own, if the need arises, as Operation El Dorado Canyon, the one-off air strike on Libya in 1986 demonstrated. This intertwining of political ends and military means comes into focus in the employment of air power in small wars and limited operations. Air power can be very attractive in the application of military power in short time frames and to achieve limited objectives. Statesmen and military strategists alike will have to grapple with this inextricable mix to ensure political objectives and military force are compatible. While this endeavour remains a difficult task in conventional wars, it becomes more complicated in the conduct of small wars.

In the prevailing global political climate, most nations would deploy their air power as part of a larger coalition. Integrating into a multinational coalition poses significant issues from the tactical to the strategic. At the operational level, most of the issues can be overcome if assured interoperability can be achieved. However, in all circumstances, the air force will have to function at the lowest common denominator of the coalition. For a technologically sophisticated air force, this could mean having to ‘ramp down’ capabilities, which could pose almost insurmountable challenges and also lead to the degradation of the performance edge. Here again, the flexibility of the force will be the game changer.

Conducting a small or hybrid war requires the concerted application of military power, most often with air power in the vanguard, and the ability to function in a multi-agency environment. Air power has the ability to be an ‘envelope capability’ that can provide the cohesion required to bring together disparate groups with divergent capabilities that could otherwise exhibit ‘seams’ impacting on success. Air power is adept at straddling a large spectrum of missions—from providing humanitarian assistance to applying lethal kinetic force in a precise, proportionate and discriminate manner. Finally, the rapidity with which flexible air power can be brought to bear, across the spectrum of conflict, remains its defining mark.

Key Points

- Air power has been employed in small wars and limited military operations from the time that it was accepted as an element of military power.
- The lessons from an individual small war cannot be considered to have universal application and must be contextualised to ensure their veracity.
- Flexibility and versatility are the hallmarks of air power employment in small or hybrid warfare.